

U.S. AMBASSADOR PATRICIA A. BUTENIS

Press Conference – Opening Statement April 24, 2006

Members of the press corps, assalamu aleikum, nomaskar, and good morning. It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to the American Club for my first press conference as the United States Ambassador to the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

In all countries, including my own, journalists are sometimes criticized for being the messenger of bad news. But we all know that a free and vibrant press is essential for any country, that it shapes the debate on key issues and provides the information citizens need to make important decisions for themselves and their country. As I prepared for my assignment to Bangladesh, I was impressed by the variety of the Bangladeshi press. I was also impressed by reporting I saw on such complex and difficult issues as the rise of religious extremism and the campaign of terror waged by Jamaatul Mujahidin. I know that some of you have been threatened and attacked because of your work, so I commend you for carrying on, even under very difficult circumstances.

I believe that you and I share many common concerns and interests: human rights, particularly freedom of the press; economic development; counter-terrorism; and law and order, to name just a few. I would like to outline what I see as my key challenges in Bangladesh. I also believe that what the United States wants for Bangladesh are the same things that most Bangladeshis want: a country free from political and terrorist violence; a strong democracy that resolves disputes through non-violent means; increased prosperity that reaches the poorest citizens; and an end to corruption that robs them of progress in these and all other areas.

Fighting terrorism is a priority not just for Bangladesh but for the entire world. It is not a fight about ideology or faith; it is about freedom, tolerance, and respect for others. In today's inter-dependent world, no one is insulated from the consequences of global problems, whether it is terrorism or avian influenza. We have welcomed the arrests of senior leaders of the JMB, the recovery of large amounts of arms and bomb-making materials, and we share your relief that there has been no new JMB attack since December. These are positive developments, and I think everyone would agree that more work remains to be done to identify and hold accountable all those persons who supported the JMB and its extremist violence, and I believe that the government is indeed committed following up. The United States continues to provide training for Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies to enhance their counter-terrorism and basic

investigatory skills. We are also providing technical assistance on the drafting of new legislation here on money laundering and terrorist financing. During my time in Bangladesh, I will work to find new opportunities to expand our law enforcement assistance programs.

The recent *TIME* magazine cover story about Bangladesh demonstrates the growing world interest in Bangladesh, in how you confront extremism and other obstacles to development. There is also great international interest in your upcoming election, and I predict it will be the most monitored election in your history, with thousands of domestic and hundreds of foreign observers. We are interested not because we support one particular party (we do not), but because only free and fair elections – without intimidation or violence or fraud -- can produce a government with the legitimacy and the authority it needs to address issues of concern to the Bangladeshi people to your international partners.

The Bangladeshi people may define their basic needs in many ways: the reliable and affordable supply of food, water, and power; free and relevant education for your children; economic opportunity for everybody; law and order, to name just a few. Meeting many of those needs depends on economic development, on defeating corruption and the other obstacles to the levels of economic growth necessary to make a real dent in poverty rates.

We Americans, based on our experience and the experience of virtually all economically successful countries, believe that foreign trade is critical for growth. The United States is already one of Bangladesh's most important trading and investment partners; we are, for example, the number-one buyer of Bangladeshi exports. I would like to expand our trading ties even further, and also to see that American products and services have the chance to compete here on a level playing field.

I look forward to serving in Bangladesh, to meeting people from all walks of life, and to visiting every region. An important part of my mission here is to listen and learn. The relationship between the United States and Bangladesh is already strong and getting stronger, so this is an exciting and hopeful time for me to be here as the American ambassador.

I would like to close by noting that General Hank Stackpole will soon be visiting Bangladesh to commemorate the 15th anniversary of Operation Sea Angel. The massive humanitarian relief mission he led in the wake of the devastating Cyclone was a shining, defining moment in our bilateral relationship, and it is well worth commemorating.

Thank you and I would be happy to take any questions.

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